

Gita, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Rachel (00:00):

We will begin. So tell me your name and who you are, where you grew up, where you live, your age, what you do, any information we might want to know about you.

Gita (00:15):

Sure. So my name's Gita [inaudible 00:00:18]. I am 34. I grew up in Los Angeles. My parents moved to Brooklyn in the 70s though from India. So I have lived in LA, Chicago, Northern India, Boston, and here.

Rachel (00:44):

And how long have you lived here?

Gita (00:46):

About nine years in August.

Rachel (00:48):

And I asked you already, but I'll ask you for the microphone. How long have you been volunteering here at Red Hook Farm?

Gita (00:58):

I volunteered here for a season or two about nine or 10 years ago and then I didn't come back until this June. And then I've been here probably eight or nine times this year.

Rachel (01:09):

What brought you here originally? And then what brought you back?

Gita (01:13):

I was, at the time really, interested in agriculture, food and the environment and had heard about this place, it was called Added Value at the time, from two women who came to the farm I was working at in India and I told them I was moving to New York and they told me I had to visit Added Value farm.

Rachel (01:33):

That's cool. And what brought you back here this year?

Gita (01:38):

Two kids in my daughter's swim class are from Red Hook and I was talking to their dad and I was like, "Wait, Red Hook?" And then some dust resettled in my memory and I decided to look at the farm.

Rachel (01:50):

That's so cool. So, Gita, I'll start the conversation with asking you the question that I ask everyone, which is when you think about global warming, what do you think about and how do you feel?

Gita (02:02):

So a lot of things. My husband and I were talking about it, how there's always been something that people in charge use to keep people in line almost, like the end of the world or whatever. So I'm not a

Gita, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

climate change skeptic, but some days I am only because I'm like, "I don't need another crisis." But just in terms of doing what I can to not increase the rate at which the polar ice caps melt is really important to me. So that has a plethora of domains that affects in your life. All the choices you make, you could make a better one ultimately. I feel a lot of things about it. I feel like it's extremely concerning, but at the same time I'm optimistic and I feel like we're resilient people and it's not going to change overnight.

Rachel (03:11):

You said a lot of things that I would like to unpack there. I'm so curious what you mean when you say, "I'm not a climate skeptic, but sometimes I am because I don't need another crisis." What does that mean?

Gita (03:28):

It just means there are some things that loom over us in daily life that we have to deal with that aren't as macro as climate change, that you have more power to control. And if you're distracted by fear because of the climate change rhetoric, that can distract you or cause more pain than you need. But at the same time, like I said, you can also always make a better choice or try to just do your best in every situation where you're faced with a choice or a crossroads.

Rachel (04:12):

So what are the micro concerns of your daily life that feel like the macro concern of a climate crisis impedes on?

Gita (04:21):

Well, I mean, I have some... How personal do you want me to speak?

Rachel (04:31):

As personal as your willing to be or interested in being.

Gita (04:34):

Around the time my daughter was born I had some issues with mental health and so just maintaining custody of her has been a real challenge since then. Not because of anything literally abusive that I did to her. I never have done anything not literally abusive to her, but it just in terms of being a steady person, it's been tricky. So just sometimes if I'm in a situation, I don't need added grief.

Rachel (05:13):

I can't relate to exactly what you've been through, but I can really relate to this feeling of the climate crisis is so big and our lives are so mired in other real deep concerns. How do you balance all of the various needs and also how do you balance urgency with all of the things that one needs to deal with and the multiple crises in one's life?

Gita (05:46):

There's this artist, Naima Penniman who has this line in one of her poems, it's the schizophrenia gifted. And I love that because I just think it puts a different spin on things. Maybe if we didn't have some of the institutions that are doing harm to the environment and to individuals who are differently abled, things would be easier, but I don't know.

Gita, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Rachel (06:13):

Have you noticed changes in the local seasons and landscapes since you've lived here? Or also you've lived for time in India and also all over, so I'm curious about your perspective on any kind of climate changes that you've witnessed throughout your life?

Gita (06:44):

There was a drought when I was a kid, but now it sometimes rains and...

Rachel (06:47):

Where?

Gita (06:49):

In Los Angeles. And people say it doesn't snow much in Chicago anymore, but it snowed while I was there. And so I really don't know. Things do change, and they are changing, but I don't have any data.

Rachel (07:09):

It's interesting. Sometimes I talk to people and they're like, "Oh, absolutely, there's so much change, there's less snow, it's warmer, such and such." And then I do talk to people, how you responded, who haven't really noticed change or your experience is different from the overall narrative of what we say about, for instance, Chicago, which actually has had a ton of snow. My husband's from Chicago and there's a ton of snow in Chicago. So it's interesting to me, people's different perspectives of what they notice and how people notice things, experience things differently.

I want to also pick up on what you talked about in terms of your day to day behaviors in trying to mitigate or do as little harm. It's very difficult for me to square how to live in this world that every day you're doing something that is damaging to the environment and my own personal feeling of, well, I'd like to do as little harm as possible but I'm not sure about what the impact is. So talk to me about your relationship to the behaviors, activities, and consumptions that you participate in on a daily basis.

Gita (08:27):

I think there's so many paradoxes every day. You know what I mean? For example, I'm like, "Well, I should take the subway, that's a good choice, instead of taking an Uber." But sometimes I don't really want my daughter to be sitting next to someone who's throwing up or not wearing a mask and acting crazy and getting too close and things like that. So that's always a tricky choice, is transportation is one of them where you have to assess in the moment. If it's pouring rain, you're like, "There's going to be service delays. I don't want to be in the tunnel for 20 minutes. That makes me freak out. So maybe I take the above ground today." But just also for my mental health, I guess you're asking about climate, but for my mental health, sometimes being part of a community, if there's a community aspect to something and the community aspect makes me feel uplifted. Even if it has other costs, I tend to choose that. You know what I mean? I don't live in Brooklyn, but I still come here to buy produce and participate.

Rachel (09:40):

I actually think mental health is deeply intertwined with this issue of climate crisis. I think it's a crisis and it's a mental health crisis as well because the stress is so great, so it's totally part of the conversation actually.

Gita, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Gita (10:01):

Well, and it's just how do you choose self love if there's just so many things going wrong. And then you're like, "Well, I hope there would be people with power to take care of it all who are steering us in the right direction." But then they're like, "Nope, there aren't." So that's tricky too.

Rachel (10:18):

How do you navigate that?

Gita (10:24):

I try to focus on my daughter usually and just what makes her happy and what would help her the most. And I don't know. Just like with farming and gardening, for example, I have almost a no-till philosophy, where you let things interact and then for ease of harvesting you might cut back some weeds, [inaudible 00:10:48] the roots in the ground and things like that. I don't know. I'm trying not to uproot her and damage her or make her into make her feel like a weed, when she's really a cultivar. Or make her feel like a cultivar when she wants to be a weed or whatever. I try to focus on my family, I guess. I don't know. There's a lot of bombarding lately with just different things via the internet and whatnot so it's hard to know what ideas are mine and what's authentic to me and what I just saw and looked good. If that answers your question.

Rachel (11:40):

Yeah, it really does. I love what you said about raising your daughter and letting her feel like a weed when she wants to be a weed, but letting her know she's a cultivar. That's so beautiful.

Gita (11:52):

Oh, thanks.

Rachel (11:54):

Let me look at actually my questions that I have. Have you ever taken political action in response to climate crisis?

Gita (12:03):

No. I did some canvassing for the Obama campaign in... Might have been 2008 that summer. I went door to door and I think he had some opinions and some promises about climate, but then that fizzled out. I left Chicago and moved to India actually so I didn't even really stay here through his term, or his terms.

Rachel (12:42):

And why haven't you... Well, you did actually take political action. You've done a lot more than I have. I've never canvased. Why haven't you taken political action or around climate crisis specifically?

Gita (12:55):

What could you ask people to do? Or what could you promise people if they give you a vote in exchange? I don't know. I don't really trust anyone enough to do it anyway.

Rachel (13:07):

Gita, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

So it feels like there's actually nothing that you could really do to move the needle politically?

Gita (13:15):

Yeah.

Rachel (13:20):

Do you feel like you and your family may be... Or do you worry that you and your family might be affected by climate crisis differently because of your race or gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, ethnicity, all of those?

Gita (13:41):

I feel like it's a good time in America to embrace your identifiers. I don't know. I don't know if it's ever a good time to be like, "I have schizophrenia. I'm bipolar." That's never a good thing, but it's not a bad time to be brown or whatever. I always tell my daughter, I'm like, "You're the same race as Kamala Harris. That's exciting."

Rachel (14:09):

How old is your daughter?

Gita (14:10):

She's eight.

Rachel (14:11):

Oh, that's a good age. Isn't it?

Gita (14:12):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rachel (14:17):

Are there ways that thinking about climate crisis affects how you plan for your future?

Gita (14:21):

Not really. We live here. My husband bought flood insurance, so I'm like, "What's that really going to do?"

Rachel (14:33):

Hopefully it will really. I hope it would, God forbid, if you got into a jam, get you out of a jam maybe.

Gita (14:39):

Maybe if the toilet overflows or something, but not if the lobby is flooded.

Rachel (14:46):

What do you think about your daughter's future?

Gita, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Gita (14:52):

She's into a lot of things, so I don't know. I really don't. I don't know. I don't think that my husband feels super safe anywhere, which is sad. And as a result, she doesn't love to spend tons of time outdoors.

Rachel (15:16):

What do you mean he doesn't feel safe anymore?

Gita (15:18):

I don't know. He's just a little bit more cautious in every way that one can be cautious.

Rachel (15:35):

What kinds of conversations do you have with your friends and family about climate crisis?

Gita (15:45):

Sam, my husband, and I the other day we're just like, "Man, this is just profiteering, people are going to cash on this just like they cash in on everything else. So just ignore it. Don't open your wallet for that." And maybe he's right. And I was agreeing with him. I'm like, "Yeah, I don't know that we necessarily need to..." I don't know. I think nonprofits can sometimes do really good work and interesting work. I hear there's that floating classroom thing going on in a couple blocks from here. And I don't know, obviously I come here and every leaf is a little solar panel, so it's helping sequester carbon.

Rachel (16:26):

Tell me about your gardening and your farming. It actually sounds like you've got an extensive experience with this.

Gita (16:33):

Yeah. I worked on a farm in Northern India for a while, and it was a conservation farm. It was called Navdanya Conservation Farm.

Rachel (16:41):

What is a conservation farm?

Gita (16:43):

They grow out climate resilient varieties for seed.

Rachel (16:46):

Oh, wow.

Gita (16:47):

Mostly of wheat and rice though.

Rachel (16:49):

Is this a new project?

Gita, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Gita (16:57):

It's been there since the 80s. The woman who started it named Vandana Shiva and she is from there where the farm is. I think she went to grad school in Canada.

Rachel (17:12):

And what brought you there?

Gita (17:15):

My mom knows her, but she's quite a climate change activist.

Rachel (17:23):

Since the 80s?

Gita (17:24):

Yeah. It obviously was an issue dear to my heart at the time. So I went there to help, volunteer, learn.

Rachel (17:37):

And what changed for you when you were there?

Gita (17:51):

It just opened my eyes to different ways you can do life, as opposed to what I knew. You know what I mean? So I thought maybe I would do things differently. Although I ended up coming back to New York. I don't know. I feel like when you have a change of heart like that though it's difficult to transition back.

Rachel (18:16):

So what was that transition like?

Gita (18:21):

At first, it wasn't that tricky, but it got more tricky as soon as I wasn't able to get a niche. I started grad school at Tufts in the agriculture, food and environment program there. It's a nutrition school, but they have an AFE program.

Rachel (18:43):

That was after or before India?

Gita (18:43):

After.

Rachel (18:45):

And I didn't finish it. I found out I was having a daughter and then I moved to New York because that's where my husband was living, and then... Anyways.

But it does sound like being up in India and farming changed your perspective in a pretty profound way.

Gita, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Gita (19:15):

Yeah, for sure.

Rachel (19:17):

Do you still feel like you can hold onto that or is it harder the farther you are from that experience?

Gita (19:24):

I think so. I think things change you in a way that it maybe affects you in ways you don't know. I don't know. Hopefully.

Rachel (19:38):

I have a few more questions for you if you've got the energy for it.

Gita (19:41):

Sure.

Rachel (19:43):

How do you make sense of this moment of change or transition? If you were to talk to a great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandkid, what do you imagine they might think about you and how you've lived your life and also then us? Personalize it and also on a macro scale.

Gita (20:07):

Hopefully it won't be too different. And so they will be able to relate to us. It's typical. My grandmother, we definitely related to her, but almost didn't in a way. She was just from such a different era. She just died last year and she was 90. And at the end of her life she was like... I don't know what the word for it is after you have a stroke and you don't talk much.

Rachel (20:34):

Oh, yeah.

Gita (20:35):

So my daughter didn't even get to know her, but she was totally from a different world.

Rachel (20:44):

At least in relation to climate change, you do see the future as something that will be able to be continuous for our children and our children's children, et cetera? They'll be able to in a world like ours?

Gita (20:59):

Hope so. I think many things are sustainable, some things aren't.

Rachel (21:05):

What do you feel hopeful for, for the future?

Gita (21:12):

Gita, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

I am excited to learn more about the best ways to farm and garden and apply the knowledge however I can because I think there's a lot of different ways to do it, and I think many of the ways are good. There are people who are very outspoken about the ways that are bad, but I feel hopeful that it still has a following and stuff. So [inaudible 00:21:46] value it.

Rachel (21:49):

What are some issues that are at the top of your list of concerns right now?

Gita (21:59):

I guess land stewardship and uses of land. And obviously you can turn a parking lot back into a farm, but it's nice if you don't have to do that, if it could like stay the way it is or that we'll have enough trees. The way they've planned the city, they put trees in cement blocks and then the tree falls and I'm like, "How are you going to put a new tree in?" It's stuff like that.

Rachel (22:28):

Are there any questions that I didn't ask you that you wish I had asked you or you expected me to ask you that I didn't?

Gita (22:38):

I don't think so. You just introduced yourself nicely so that I'd come say hello. And I had gotten to the end of the row I was working on so I was like, "Maybe I'll do that instead of a new assignment."

Rachel (22:48):

I'm so glad that you did. Gita, one more question.

Gita (22:51):

Sure.

Rachel (22:52):

Are there any questions you're asking yourself that do or don't have any answers to them right now?

Gita (23:06):

No.

Rachel (23:08):

Thank you so much. I'm really, really glad you came over. This was awesome. Really appreciate it.

Gita (23:13):

You're welcome.